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Thetis and Cheiron in Thessaly

Abstract: This article examines an area of Thessalian mythology and cult surrounding the figures of Thetis the Nereid and Cheiron the centaur. It argues that the pair derive a substantial amount of their characterisation, in ancient narratives, from their mutual association, and that only by studying them together can we receive a full insight into their mythological and religious personae. Thetis and Cheiron are shown to differ significantly with regard to a number of themes, such as their relationship with symbolic topography and the natural landscape of Thessaly and – most strikingly – their kourotrophic roles. Thetis' strong association with ambiguous nurture is argued to connect with her physical conception, especially her association with the shape-changing *sepia*, cuttlefish, an association which involves her in the wider ancient discourse of unreliable female beauty. It is also shown that the Thetis of Homeric epic is significantly different from the Thetis found in other ancient narratives.

Résumé : Cet article étudie une partie de la mythologie et du culte thessaliens autour des figures de la Néréide Thétis et du centaure Chiron. Il montre qu'une part importante de leur caractéristiques, dans les récits anciens, provient de leur association et que c'est seulement en les étudiant ensemble qu'on prend la pleine mesure de leur dimension mythologique et religieuse. Thétis et Chiron présentent des différences substantielles sur un certain nombre de plans, tels que leur relation à la topographie symbolique et au paysage naturel de la Thessalie, et, de manière plus surprenante, leur rôle de courotrophes. L'association étroite entre Thétis et l'ambiguïté du nourrissage est mise en relation avec sa constitution physique et avec le *sepia* protiforme, le poulpe. Cette dernière association l'insère dans un ample discours ancien sur la duplicité de la beauté féminine. En outre, la Thétis de l'épopée homérique est fort différente de la Thétis que l'on trouve dans les autres récits anciens.

1. Introduction

In his *Kernos* article of 1995, Philippe Borgeaud made a convincing assertion of the mythical and religious connections binding the sea-goddess Thetis with the Sepias promontory in Thessaly.[1] This presented another dimension of a figure most commonly viewed through her Iliadic persona as the grieving mother of Achilles. It also valuably brought to the fore the cuttle-fish associations of Thetis, which tend to be neglected in scholarship but which, argued Borgeaud, are important in understanding her Thessalian divine persona.

[1] Ph. BORGEAUD, "Note sur le Sépias. Mythe et histoire," *Kernos* 8 (1995), p. 23-29.

However, much more can be said about Thessalian Thetis. It is the contention of this article that the most fruitful inquiry examines Thetis not as an isolated entity but in combination with another important figure in Thessalian myth and cult: the centaur Cheiron. An examination of their relationship may shed much light both on the two deities in question and on the complex of myth and worship which existed in the Pelion area of Thessaly, an area which remains largely unexplored in modern historiography.

It would be an oversimplification of their complicated personalities to view Thetis and Cheiron solely through a pattern of strict opposition. However, this paper argues for the value of studying them in combination with an eye to their differences. The surest justification for this joint treatment is that, in myth, they are seldom completely apart. Clearly they were considered together in mythological narrative, so the combination is not an artificial one, imposed on the ancient material. Iconographically, they represent two different ways of expressing the same idea: the incorporation of animal and human physical components within a single entity, Cheiron through hybridism, Thetis through shape-changing. It is also true to say that very often in Greek myth and cult it is contrasts which carry the burden of symbolic expression. These contrasts are never black and white, they are not neat antitheses; but they do hold one (not the) key to understanding abiding ancient attitudes and preoccupations. Some such preoccupations come to light when we examine the way in which the characters of Thetis and Cheiron are differentiated, as differentiated they are, with a force which reveals their combined symbolic valency. This paper traces what could be seen as a hostile mythographical tradition in the characterisation of Thetis, one which runs parallel with the depiction of Cheiron as a paragon of various crucial virtues.

Thessaly is a rich land in myth. It is rich in heroes, such as Achilles, Admetos, Asklepios, Jason, Pelias, Peleus, Peirithoös, Protesilaos. As homeland of the Aiakid clan which produced Achilles, it is a significant backdrop to the Trojan war. So Thessalian names would have been part of the epic and the oral traditions, and in this dimension the region does not lack glory. At the same time, these myths do not come to us from Thessalian sources, and from the ancient historian's point of view Thessalian culture and society remain difficult to reconstruct. Just as Borgeaud in his work on Pan has expressed despair of ever attaining a vision of the 'real Arkadia',[2] so we must here resign ourselves to being unable to establish myths as Thessalian products, and must acknowledge the certainty of perceptions and stories being imposed on the Thessalian setting from without. However, the Thessalian setting is of the greatest significance. One major aim of this paper is to shed further light on an aspect of Thetis that runs alongside, and rather counter to, the pervasive characterisation of epic, and

[2] See Ph. BORGEAUD, *The Cult of Pan in Ancient Greece*, trans. K. Atlass and J. Redfield, Chicago, 1988, esp. p. 4-5.

to reveal her as a component within a strong network of intertwined mythology set around Pelion and the Magnesian littoral. That this Thetis is not 'authentically' or 'purely' Thessalian is in fact to be welcomed, as it allows one to regard the region within a much broader structure of story-telling.

2. The juxtaposition of Thetis and Cheiron in myth and cult

As a preliminary to assessing the thematic significance of their association, I shall lay out the main points of connection. In myth, the two deities are firmly linked. The chief elements may be enumerated as follows:

- One (rare) tradition makes Thetis Cheiron's daughter[3] in lieu of the more commonly found Hippe.
- Cheiron advises Peleus on the capture of Thetis on the shore.[4]
- The wedding of Peleus and Thetis takes place in Cheiron's cave.[5] (Cheiron gives Peleus an ash spear as a wedding present.)[6]

When Thetis leaves Peleus, the infant Achilles is consigned to the centaur's care, and receives from him tuition in various skills (for sources, see below). So strong are the Thetis-Peleus-Cheiron links that one scholar has even posited the existence of a lost epic, the *Peleis*, treating the episodes of the couple's wedding and the childhood of Achilles, and Cheiron's benign contributions.[7] This is impossible to prove, especially the title, but is not on the face of it unlikely.

The cult connections are less tangible: they rest largely on proximity. Thetis' worship on Sepias is mentioned in Herodotos,[8] but a degree of uncertainty remains as to quite where this promontory was, though we know it to have been on the 'arm' of Pelion.[9] However, it is hard to ascertain whether Thetis

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[3] Hyginus, *Astronomica* II, 18; scholion on Apollonios Rhodios, *Argon.* I, 558.

[4] Apollodoros, III, 13, 5. Interestingly, in Ovid's version (*Metamorphoses* XI, 221-265) this advisory role is taken by another old sage: Proteus.

[5] Apollod., *l.c.*

[6] See Homer, *Iliad* XIX, 389-391: here the spear is explicitly described as made from Pelian ash, a natural product of the mountain.

[7] W. MANNHARDT, *Antike Wald- und Feldkulte aus nordeuropäischer Überlieferung*, Berlin, 1877, Bd. II, p. 52-55; see also P. PHILIPPSON, *Thessalische Mythologie*, Zurich, 1944, p. 137. Mannhardt was convinced that the lost *Peleis* was of earlier date than the *Iliad* – a shaky thesis.

[8] Herodotos, VII, 191, 2. The passage does not describe an offering by locals, but by the stranded Persian fleet; however, it is motivated by the knowledge that offers to Thetis at that place were the custom.

[9] Wace and Droop excavated at Theotokou, 'the traditional site of Sepias', where they found, beneath a modern chapel, Doric architectural fragments but no inscriptions or substantial temple remains. They concluded, dramatically, that Sepias itself cannot have been in the Theotokou area but must, instead, have been 'near the foot of Mount Pelion at Cape Porí.' A position near the foot of Pelion would bring Thetis' sacred territory, whatever worship took place there, into even closer proximity to the cave of Cheiron. However, it is likely that in making this conclusion,

had an actual temenos in this area – as a single late source suggests[10] – or whether the area was simply sacred to her in a less minutely defined way. The latter is more likely, and does not of course preclude worship; it would be a gross misrepresentation of Greek religious behaviour as a whole to suggest that it always took place within man-made structures.

Cheiron too seems to have enjoyed a general cultic association with a patch of territory, in his case the summit of Mount Pelion, with whose herbal lore he is thoroughly enmeshed. However, unlike Thetis, we also have a specific structure, though a natural one: the cave where, in myth, Cheiron dwelt, and in cult, he was worshipped. The Hellenistic geographer Herakleides tells of a ritual which brought an annual procession of young men to the mountain wrapped in new fleeces; they probably visited both the Cheironion – the cave of Cheiron – and the sanctuary of Zeus Akraios.[11] Herakleides also provides another detail of Cheiron's role as a deity in this region: his association with a local clan of healers.[12] This and other features of the Pelion cult we shall return to at a later stage. Here it is only necessary to note the close proximity within Thessaly of Cheiron's Pelion cult site and Thetis' Sepias one.[13] It will be shown in section ii. that geographical proximity of myth and cult is matched by a thematic closeness, albeit one which tends to consist largely of contrast.

However, it should be noted before proceeding that Thetis' cult seems to have had a dimension which Cheiron's did not. The evidence for this is not unproblematic, but it is suggestive. In his *Heroikos*, the third century AD author Philostratus describes an annual *theoria* conducted by the Thessalians to the

based on a lack of material remains, Wace and Droop were over-prioritising buildings and other material remains as evidence of cult. See A.J.B. WACE, and J.B. DROOP, "Excavations at Theotokou, Thessaly," *ABSA* 13 (1906-7), p. 309-327, esp. p. 311.

[10] Scholion on Lykophron, *Alexandra*, 175.

[11] The text in question was previously attributed to Dikaiarchos, and appears under his name in *FHistGr* II F 60 (ed. MÜLLER). For the attribution to Herakleides, see F. PFISTER, *Die Reisebilder des Herakleides*, Vienna, 1951. For details and discussion of this ritual and of the Pelion cult of Cheiron generally, see W. BURKERT, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Myth and Ritual*, trans. P. Bing, Berkeley, 1983, 109-116; R. BUXTON, *Imaginary Greece. The Contexts of Mythology*, Cambridge, 1994, 94; E.M.M. ASTON, "The Absence of Chiron," *CQ* 56 (2006), p. 349-362.

[12] Herakleides fr. 2, 12 (ed. PFISTER).

[13] Both deities in fact had other sites of worship in Thessaly: Cheiron in a cave near Pharsalos where a long verse-inscriptions includes him in a catalogue of deities, and Thetis in and around Pharsalos. To find them cropping up again not far apart is interesting, but in this instance we do not have relevant mythology connecting them with each other and with Pharsalos; therefore it is impossible to make any useful conjectures about the significance of their proximity there. With regard to the Pelion region, by contrast, they were both obviously key players in local mythical dramas, and their interrelation can very valuably be examined. Sources for Thetis' worship in Pharsalos: Euripides, *Andromache* 20; Strabo 9.431. (See also *SEG* 45, 637 for possible epigraphic evidence; however, the reading of the stone is very uncertain.) Near Pharsalos: Polybios, XVIII, 20, 6; Pherekydes, *FGrH* 328 F 1. Discussion of Cheiron's cult near Pharsalos: D. LEVI, "L'antro delle ninfe e di Pan a Farsalo in Tessaglia: Topographia e scavi," *ASAA* 6-7 (1923), p. 27-42; J. LARSON, *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore*, Oxford, 2001, p. 13-20; ASTON, *l.c.* (n. 11).

Troad, where they perform offerings to Achilles, first as to a deceased hero and then as to an immortal god. The ritual involves an evocation of Thetis, which will be discussed further below. However, it is important to acknowledge that Thetis's worship exists on a far broader scale than that of Cheiron. On the one hand, Philostratus presents the *theoria* as being pan-Thessalian, taking us out of the Magnesian context of Thetis' and Cheiron's proximity; on the other, the journey to the Troad takes us out of Thessaly altogether and into the grand scope of epic. This is a sphere into which Cheiron's cult seems never to have strayed.

The *Heroikos* text will be significant at other stages of this discussion, and so it seems advisable to treat some of its difficulties now, in particular the fraught question of whether or not it reflects genuine Thessalian ritual practice as it purports to do.

Scholars of the Second Sophistic rightly treat the *Heroikos* as a piece of literary sophistication on a par with the *Life of Apollonios*, with which it almost certainly shares authorship. As Bowie, Anderson, Rutherford and others have demonstrated,[14] the piece is thematically and stylistically enmeshed with the rest of the Philostratean corpus in all its subtlety. At the same time, there have been several attempts to reveal it as a reflection of genuine cultic practices, beliefs and sites in existence at the time of its creation. The two approaches, though typically divergent in motivation, are not of course incompatible: clearly both literary artifice and a reflection of certain realities are present in the text. It is noted by Christopher Jones that the cult-site of Protesilaos at Elaious is depicted with quite some loyalty to what was actually there;[15] and though Philostratus' depiction of Achilles' cult in the Euxine departs somewhat from the fascinating archaeological and epigraphic record, it is by no means baseless fantasy. The tomb of Achilles in the Troad, central to the section of the *Heroikos* here discussed, is mentioned as early as Herodotos.[16] Philostratus was clearly interested in the actual state of

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[14] E.L. BOWIE, "Philostratus: Writer of Fiction," in J.R. MORGAN and R. STONEMAN (eds.), *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context*, London, 1994, p. 181-99; G. ANDERSON, *Philostratus: Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century AD*, London, 1986; I.C. RUTHERFORD, "Black Sails for Achilles: The Thessalian Pilgrimage in Philostratus' *Heroicus*," in E.L. BOWIE and J. ELSNER (eds.), *Philostratus*, Cambridge, 2009, p. 230-250 (my thanks go to the author for kindly allowing me to read the paper in advance of publication). See also E.B. AITKEN, "The Cult of Achilles in Philostratus' *Heroikos*: A Study in the Relation of Canon and Ritual," in S.R. ASIRVATHAM, C. PACHE and J. WATROUS (eds.), *Between Magic and Religion: Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Society*, Lanham Md., 2001, p. 127-136. This article stresses the importance of reading the *Heroikos* against the backdrop of 'Severan attempts towards the renewal of hero-cults,' (129).

[15] C.P. JONES, "Philostratus' *Heroikos* and its Setting in Reality," *JHS* 121 (2001), p. 141-149: see esp. p. 144-145.

[16] At Sigeion near the Hellespont: Hdt., V, 94; see also Strabo XIII, 1, 32. In the *Iliad*, though of course the cult of Achilles is not explicitly mentioned, there is a description of his tomb as a beacon helping foundering sailors at sea: see XIX, 374-380. The cults of heroes such as Achilles are of course very often epic-driven, but this does not make them less 'authentic' than types of worship which are not. On the matter of the influence of epic on cult, see esp. J.N. COLDSTREAM, "Hero-Cults in the

hero-cult, and collects much material by way of illustration. Scholars have successfully extrapolated religious practice from other parts of the *Heroikos*; it can be done.[17] The text, for all that we may call some of its details into question, is probably not solely a flight of intellectual fancy.

Moreover, other evidence suggests at least a Hellenistic pedigree for the rites described. An inscription re-analysed quite recently by Bruno Helly and dated by him, soundly, to the mid second century BC testifies to regular and significant cultural contact between the Thessalian city of Larissa and the Troad.[18] Though Helly's attempt to read the context of the inscription in the light of Philostratus' account of the annual *theoria* is not without problems, we can be sure that the narrative of the *Heroikos* is based on a real and longstanding rapport between Thessaly and the Troad. In my view, Philostratus is likely to have added some details, but not to have invented the ritual entirely. We cannot discount the possibility that Thetis' rôle was partly or indeed wholly invented by Philostratus, but even if this is so it accords very completely with the mythology surrounding Thetis' contribution to Achilles' immortality, in particularly as reflected in the *Aithiopis* of Arktinos (on which see further below).

At the same time, the *Heroikos* plainly has aims beyond the accurate re-telling of rather recherché religious practice. The *Heroikos* is essentially a work about epic: about memory and about the role of the poet in preserving kleos and continuity. (This is of course quite in keeping with the anxieties about loss and decay which characterise the period in which Philostratus worked.)[19] The ritual in honour of Achilles may not be the author's creation, but it does accord with the preoccupations of the text (hence its inclusion). In addition, the ritual itself must have been one of those that appear to have been fuelled by epic to a large extent.[20] This immediately lifts it out of the purely Thessalian context, out of the realm of local cult, into the pan-Hellenic dimension of poetry. That Achilles and Thetis had their roots in Thessalian myth is quite probable; that the details in the *Heroikos* give us a snap-shot of uncontaminated Thessalian custom is not.

Age of Homer," *JHS* 96 (1976), p. 8-17: Coldstream famously attributed the rise of hero cults in the eighth century almost entirely to the spread of epic; for a refutation of this view, see G. NAGY, *The Best of the Achaeans*, Johns Hopkins, 1979, p. 115-116: Nagy believes that hero cults and epic grew in importance in parallel, both responding to the rise of the polis. For a useful brief re-appraisal of some of the key questions, giving further bibliography, see A. SNODGRASS, "The Archaeology of the Hero," in R. BUXTON (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, Oxford, 1994, p. 180-190.

[17] E.g. W. BURKERT, "Jason, Hypsipyle and New Fire at Lemnos: A Study in Myth and Ritual," in BUXTON (ed.), *o.c.* (n. 16), p. 227-249.

[18] B. HELLY, "Décret de Larisa pour Bombos, fils d'Alkaios, et pour Leukios, fils de Nikasias, citoyens d'Alexandrie de Troade (ca 150 av. J.-C.)," *Chiron* 36 (2006), p. 171-203.

[19] On the nostalgia and retrospection of Second Sophistic authors, see E.L. BOWIE, "Greeks and their Past in the Second Sophistic," *P&P* 46 (1970), p. 3-41.

[20] See above n. 16.

3. Mobility and fixity (sea and mountain)

Thetis is famous for slipping away. She is like other sea divinities in this regard, forever eluding the grasping hands of terrestrial men, though what they want from her is not prophecy (as in the case of Proteus) but sex: once it has been determined by Zeus that Thetis should be the bride of Peleus, the hero struggles to catch her and hold her on the Sepias shore. Her evasiveness is expressed through a rapid and dramatic series of transformations, which caught the imagination of countless ancient vase-painters and writers and is, as a consequence, a famous mythological episode today. However, it can be shown that this episode is just one aspect of the extreme mobility of Thetis, and that her mobility is that of a being with only the lightest of links to the shore.

In the *Heroikos*, when the Thessalian theoria reaches the Troad and begins to prepare for its offerings to Achilles, the hero's mother is called upon with a hymn which ends with the following words:[21]

> Come to this lofty hill
> In quest of the burnt offerings with Achilles.
> Come without tears, come with Thessaly:
> Dark Thetis, Pelian Thetis.

There is much here that is of interest, but here I wish to highlight the manner of Thetis' hoped-for participation. Thetis is not herself Thessalian; as a daughter of Nereus she comes from the depths of the sea. However, she is here described as Peleia, which could be interpreted as a reference either to Pelion or to Peleus; either way it links her with her career in Thessaly. She is also implored to come 'with Thessaly' or 'in company with Thessaly'. This phrase is cryptic, but the overall effect is to designate her as one of the vital Thessalian 'products' which the *theoroi* bring with them to the Troad: others include wood from Pelion and water from the river Spercheios. Achilles himself is different. As the hymn itself says, he belongs half to the Troad where his tomb is, and half to the Euxine where he lives as an immortal god;[22] none of him is Thessalian. Also significant here is the way in which Thetis can, whatever her origins, be expected to turn up instantaneously in a completely different location. Of course, all gods can do this; but Thetis has a special mode of arrival in many narratives: emerging out of the sea.

She does this most famously perhaps in the Iliad. On several occasions in the action of the poem, Thetis comes out of the sea onto the Trojan shore to communicate with Achilles: first in response to his anguish at Agamemnon's

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[21] Philostratus, *Heroikos*, 53, 10: βαῖνε πρὸς αἰπὺν τόνδε κολωνὸν | μετ' Ἀχιλλέως ἔμπ᾽ρα, | βαῖν' ἀδάκρ᾽τος μετὰ Θεσσαλίας, | Θέτι κ᾽ανέα, Θέτι Πηλεία. I use here the translation provided in J.K.B. MACLEAN and E.B. AITKEN, *Flavius Philostratus:* On Heroes, Atlanta, 2001. Unless otherwise stated, all other translations in this article are my own.

[22] Philostr., *Her.*, 53, 10.

theft of Briseis; second to console him for the death of Patroklos; third to bring him the miraculous armour of Hephaistos.[23] Grief and consolation are the chief themes.[24] The arrival of Thetis on the scene each time is one of miraculous swiftness; she hears his weeping despite the distance of air and water, and emerges from the sea cloaked in mist. Moreover, we are given insights into where she is supposed to be coming from. On the first two occasions of her arrival on land, she is described as sitting in the depths of the sea (*benthos halos*) beside her father the Halios Gerôn when she hears her son's lamentation and rises to go to him; on the second we have the added details of a crowd of fellow-Nereids sitting about her also. The space in which this marine court resides is also, in the example in Book XVIII, described as an *argupheon speos* – literally a 'silver-shining cave'. The word speos in almost all other instances of its use in ancient texts is used to refer to terrestrial grottoes, such as serve the Kyklopes as homes.[25] It is striking to find Thetis and her companions occupying a speos in the sea; perhaps it derives from the abiding association of caves with nymphs in Greek thought.

Another example of Thetis performing her swift visitation from the sea is to be found in Apollonios' *Argonautika* (IV, 842-865) where she comes to advise Peleus and through him the other Argonauts. Interestingly, although here her emergence from the sea is, as usual, depicted as miraculously fast, she herself describes her prior movement within the sea, finding and enlisting the aid of her Nereid sisters, as long and arduous (lines 838-839). So the marine environment does not preclude the difficulties of travel, if effort is what the poet wishes to emphasise; but it does always facilitate rapid, almost epiphanic, arrivals onto the shore. The sea, therefore, does not seem entirely to be bound by the usual rules of space and distance: it is a flexible junction allowing access onto all shores equally. This makes Thetis easy to summon. This is plainly the quality which the Thessalian sacrificers on the shore of Troy hope to make use of when they invoke her. It also makes Thetis a deity who is potentially very present and accessible. However, it has another side: her unusually dominant ability to absent herself, to be examined further later in this article.

So Thetis has two spheres of existence. On the one hand, she dwells at the bottom of the sea, from which she may emerge wherever she wishes. On the other, she is, in cult and in the *Heroikos*' representation, of – or strongly associated with – Pelion. In myth, she has four spheres; the sea, her place of origin; the Sepias shore, where she is caught and subdued by Peleus; Mount Pelion itself, where her marriage is conducted; and Pharsalos, where she and Peleus live once married and where she bears her children. Of course, the sea is

[23] Hom. *Il.* I, 357-363; XVIII, 65-77; XIX, 1-11.

[24] On the association of Thetis with both grief and anger, see L. SLATKIN, "The Wrath of Thetis," *TAPhA* 116 (1986), p. 1-24.

[25] See e.g. Hom. *Od.* IX, 400.

the only place which has a lasting claim on her presence, and it is to the sea that she inevitably returns. The land is a place for brief sojourns: in Ovid's retelling, she has come out onto the shore for a nap when Peleus assaults her.[26] It is not a zone in which any sea-divinity is prepared to stay on a permanent basis.

To return, however, to the motif of Thetis' arrival from the sea, and to her marine mobility generally, we can see that it places her at significant variance from Cheiron, the dweller on the mountain. Whereas Thetis is summoned, and arrives, Cheiron stays where he is, and is visited. This happens both in myth and (probably, though the evidence is not uncontroversial) in cult.

In myth, infant heroes are brought to Cheiron on Pelion. The roll-call is extraordinary: Achilles, Aristaios, Aktaion, Asklepios, Jason: these are some of his famous charges.[27] He ushers them from infancy into adulthood, equipping them with various essential heroic skills, but he himself is astonishingly constant in terms of age and state. We are given narratives to explain his birth, but hear next to nothing about his youth or upbringing; maturity, with its attendant qualities of *sophia* and *sôphrosunê*, is Cheiron's natural and unwavering condition. They are constant as his location is constant; he affects change, but does not undergo it; he inspires movement, but does not himself move. The exception to this is of course his death, discussed below.

There is a form of ritual counterpart to this motif of the young heroes' sojourn with Cheiron: the pilgrimage described by Herakleides, mentioned above. The relevant passage is as follows:[28]

> On the peaks of the mountain's top there is the cave called the Cheironion and a *hieron* of Zeus Aktaios, to which, at the rising of the Dog Star, at the time of greatest heat, the most distinguished of the citizens and those in the prime of life ascend, having been chosen in the presence of the priest, wrapped in thick new fleeces. So great is the cold on the mountain.

It is very important not to try to make this rather cursory description of the ritual say or mean things it does not. It does not expressly state that the young men taking part come to worship Cheiron. Indeed, ἐφ' ὃ on the second line clearly states that the main destination is the *hieron* of Zeus Aktaios (usually corrected to Akraios, a modification about which I have some doubt but shall

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[26] Ovid, *Met.* XI, 238. This motif of the sea deity using the shore as a place for restful (but often perilous!) sleep is found elsewhere, for example in the episode in the *Odyssey* (IV, 382-570) in which Menelaos captures Proteus, who is sleeping in a cave on the shore, a liminal space if ever there was one.

[27] Achilles: Pindar, *Nemean* III, 43-49; Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* I, 551-558; Apollod., III, 13, 6. Aristaios: Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* II, 508-510. Aktaion: Apollod., IV, 4, 4. Asklepios: Pind. *Pythian* III, 5-7; *Nem.* III, 53-54; Apollod., III, 10, 3. Jason: Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women*, 13; Pind, *Nem.* III, 53-54.

[28] Ἐπ' ἄκρας δὲ τῆς τοῦ ὄρ῾ος κορ῾φῆς σπήλαιόν ἐστι τὸ καλούμενον Χειρώνιον καὶ Διὸς Ἀκταίο῾ ἱερόν ἐφ' ὃ κατὰ κ῾ύνος ἀνατολὴν κατὰ τὸ ἀκμαιότατον καῦμα ἀναβαίνο῾σι τῶν πολιτῶν οἱ ἐπιφανέστατοι καὶ ταῖς ἡλικίαις ἀκμάζοντες, ἐπιλεχθέντες ἐπὶ τοῦ ἱερέως, ἐνεζωσμένοι κώδια τρίποκα καινά. τοιοῦτον σ῾μβαίνει ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρο῾ς τὸ ψῦχος εἶναι.

maintain for the convenience of the current discussion). About the cult of Zeus on this site we currently know next to nothing. As to Cheiron's significance here, although he is not the chief recipient of the rite, it may plausibly be argued that it, and he, contribute massively to the nature and the symbolic valency of the ritual's destination, the mountaintop.

The dominant theme of the ritual is changes of state, symbolised in the donning of fleeces, which entails a dramatic and programmatic transformation: the noblest of the citizens don the garb of the rustic and the primitive. Since fleeces and caves share this quality, the visitors to the area of the Cheironion are modelling themselves on their destination, and undergoing transformation in parallel with their spatial movement away from the cultivated plain and up into the wild territory of the oros, as Buxton rightly observes.[29] They are also, in a sense, stepping back into primeval time.

To relate this back to Cheiron's mythical visitors, his young charges, two things must be said. First, myth and ritual are both similar and interestingly divergent. Whereas the infant heroes who go to Cheiron in myth are transformed by him into adults with the trappings of aristocratic paideia (such as hunting and music), the real-life visitors of the fleece ritual reverse the process, losing the outer manifestations of their civilisation and going backwards in time. However, though this aspect of the rite is not treated by Herakleides, we can assume that the Thessalians afterwards don their usual clothing and return to their ordered lives on the plain. Perhaps it is this, the aftermath of the visit, which is analogous to the paideia and introduction to the life of the civilised human community which Cheiron gives to his mythic charges. However, it must also be stressed that the ritual is not a rite of passage for adolescents. Cheiron is not assisting in the progress of young Thessalians into adulthood, as he does in myth: the performers of the fleece ritual are explicitly described as already having attained full adulthood. There is therefore not a complete and exact mapping of ritual onto myth.

That said, it is worth briefly noting that Cheiron may have been associated with adolescent transitions in another cult site. Philippson has argued, in a discussion which encourages tentative credence, that Cheiron was worshipped on Thera, near the temple of Apollo Karneios, in a kourotrophic capacity: his name appears in a seventh-century dedicatory inscription[30] alongside names such as Lokaia which are associated with childbirth and -rearing, and there is also some evidence for his involvement in local ephebic rites.[31] This would

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[29] BUXTON, *o.c.* (n. 11), p. 94. For a more complicated argument regarding the ritual association of Zeus and Cheiron on Pelion, see BURKERT, *o.c.* (n. 11), p. 109-116.

[30] *IG* XII 3, 360. See M. VOGEL, *Chiron: der Kentaur mit der Kithara*, Bonn, 1978, p. 218. The discussion is to be found in PHILIPPSON, *o.c.* (n. 7), p. 150-155.

[31] PHILIPPSON, *o.c.* (n. 7). Much less persuasive is her theory that the cult of Cheiron travelled from Pelion in Thessaly to the Peloponnese, and from there to Thera; it retained, she argues, its

suggest that his excellent record of affecting human transitions has an echo in his cultic function. However, the Theran material remains highly speculative, and as for the Pelion site, there is no evidence of rites of passage, though this does not by itself mean they did not occur.

So, to conclude this section, it may be seen that whereas Thetis is a mobile being who may be coaxed into a brief contact with the shore but who has no permanent residence there, Cheiron is a fixity on his mountain-top and is visited there accordingly in both myth and cult. (His only mythical departure from the cave leads, in the end, to his death, as if the cave is a place he cannot return to having once left it.)[32] He does not change, but he effects change in others; he himself is static, but he effects movement and travel. Thetis, by comparison, is changeable and mobile. One final point must be made to modify this contrast, however, and it is a point which in fact narrows the distance between Cheiron and Thetis in a revealing way, reminding us that no symbolic contrast should ever be read as absolute or undeviating.

Cheiron's cave is a place of both real and mythical visits, true, but its inhabitant is prone to a special kind of uncertainty regarding his presence. In another article,[33] I have shown that Cheiron is often depicted in the ancient literature as a departed, absent being; also, that this is reflected in his cult persona as the ancestor or fore-runner of a line of healers, a role which, while it emphasises his importance, also entails his supercession. This is in marked contrast with heroes such as Asklepios and Trophonios whose cult sites are marked by a sense of heightened personal residency.[34] The implications of this for the fleece-ritual are striking: perhaps the Thessalians are visiting not so much Cheiron as a monument to his erstwhile, his mythical, presence.

This does not, however, negate the difference between Cheiron and the supremely mobile Thetis. We just have to acknowledge that both might, in their different ways, have a tendency towards questionable presence at their places of

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Thessalian character, including the cave-association and the kourotrophic element. The evidence adduced is somewhat questionable. (For example, Apollodoros' account of Cheiron's expulsion from Pelion to Malea – Apollod., II, 5, 4. – is taken as referring, mythologically, to the first leg of the journey.) The idea is not, however, *per se* impossible.

[32] In the account of Apollodoros, Cheiron ends up in the Peloponnese following the expulsion of the centaurs (himself among them) from Thessaly by the Lapiths; once there, on Cape Malea, he encounters Herakles, who accidentally shoots him with a poisoned arrow. Cheiron relinquishes his immortality when the pain becomes unbearable. See Apollod., II, 5, 4.

[33] ASTON, *l.c.* (n. 11).

[34] On the importance of personal presence to the cult of Asklepios, and its Thessalian connections, see E.M.M. ASTON, "Asclepius and the Legacy of Thessaly," *CQ* 54 (2004), p. 18-32; on the shared characteristics of the 'underground hero', see the article of Y. USTINOVA, "'Either a Daimon, or a Hero, or Perhaps a God:' Mythical Residents of Subterranean Chambers," *Kernos* 15 (2002), p. 267-288, which succeeds in establishing the type as a coherent phenomenon in Greek religion. See also Y. USTINOVA, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind. Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth*, Oxford, 2009, p. 89-108.

worship. Another, related, shared feature is that both are associated not with highly specific and artificially demarcated zones but with more general and natural ones: Cheiron with Pelion (though with the cave as prime focus) and Thetis with the Sepias peninsula. Neither's worship is centred on built structures; neither has a strictly bounded temenos. However, the difference resides in the two types of topography. Whereas the mountain is a fixed point to which people may and do travel, which does not move but which causes movement, the sea is a fluid, multi-directional junction allowing for almost limitless arrival and departure.

4. Healing and pestilence

This paper stays on the subject of symbolic topography for the next section, which will demonstrate that while Cheiron's divine powers embody the healing plants associated with Mount Pelion, Thetis can represent a more malignant property of the sea.

Cheiron, Pelion and the mountain's native healing herbs form an inseparable triad in the works of many ancient authors. This is reflected especially strongly in a fragment of the Hellenistic author Nicander' *Theriaka*, which gives the following medical instruction:[35]

> Choose first the medicinal root of Cheiron,
> Which carries the name of the centaur, Kronos' son; Cheiron once
> Discovered and took note of it on a snowy ridge of Pelion.
> It is encircled by waving leaves like sweet marjoram,
> And its flowers are golden in appearance. Its root, at the
> Surface and not deep, resides in the grove of Pelethronios.

Cheiron, then, is the mythical discoverer of a major natural resource, and a form of culture-hero. This plainly accords with his healing persona among the Magnesians. He gives his name to the plant called 'Cheironeion', whose properties are described by Theophrastos: it is used to cure the bites of snakes, spiders and other venomous creatures. [36]

So Cheiron in a sense embodies the healing properties of Mount Pelion itself, in the form of its native herbs. Thetis and the sea, however, have quite another quality in this regard. For the most striking expression of this difference one must return to the *Heroikos*, and to the section in which the hero Protesilaos (his words relayed by the Thracian vine-dresser to his Phoenician

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[35] Nicander, *Theriaka* 500-505: πρώτην μὲν Χείρωνος ἐπαλθέα ῥίζαν ἑλέσθαι, | Κενταύρου Κρονίδαο φερώνυμον, ἥν ποτε Χείρων | Πηλίου ἐν νιφόεντα κιχὼν ἐφράσσατο δειρῇ. | τῆς μὲν ἀμαρακόεσσα χυτὴ περιδέδρομε χαίτη, | ἄνθεα δὲ χρύσεια φαείνεται· ἡ δ' ὑπὲρ αἴης | ῥίζα καὶ οὐ βυθόωσα Πελεθρόνιον νάπος ἴσχει.

[36] Theophrastos, *On Plants* IX, 11, 1-7. It is clear from the description of the plant (golden flowers) that it is the same species as described in the Nicander passage.

interlocutor) describes the anger of Achilles against the Thessalians when the latter have neglected – or rather, downgraded – the sacrifices performed in the Troad.[37] The passage runs (it opens with the words of Protesilaos):[38]

> "When I perceived that he was angry with the Thessalians over the offerings to the dead, I said, 'For my sake, Achilles, disregard this.' But he was not persuaded and said that he would give them some misfortune from the sea. I certainly feared that this dread and cruel hero would find something from Thetis to use against them." As for me, my guest, after I heard these things from Protesilaos, I believed that red blights and fogs had been hurled by Achilles against the grainfields of Thessaly for destruction of their agricultural produce, since these misfortunes from the sea seemed somehow to settle upon their fruitful lands. I also thought that some of the cities in Thessaly would be flooded…

Here, clearly, the sea is a source of pestilence; Thetis represents the sea; and Achilles has a special ability as her son to unleash her malign marine powers on those who offend him. Some very interesting research has been done by Slatkin into Thetis' role in the theme of Achilles' *mênis*, and the two have been shown to be joined, in epic, within a potent discourse of anger and grief.[39] Philostratus' text, however, adds the special ingredient of the sea as source of blight and contagion, especially targeting agricultural achievement.

The pestilent properties of the sea are quite widely expressed in antiquity. For example, Plutarch in his *Quaestiones Convivalium* (*Mor.,* 626f-627f) asks the question why sea-water is not used to wash clothes, and the various responses focus on the sea's impurity: this is not just brine, but is also 'coarse, earthy matter' (τὸ τραχὺ καὶ γεῶδες) and, curiously, oil. The unclean quality of the sea is a topos in ancient attitudes which has been brilliant described by Vermeule, who argues that the sea was perceived as a repository of the unwanted, the unlucky, the contaminated.[40] This is encapsulated by the remark in Euripides' Iphigenia among the Taurians (line 1193) that 'The sea washes away all the evils

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[37] Mention of the anger of Achilles towards the Thessalians is also to be found in the *Life of Apollonios* – see e.g. IV, 12 and IV, 16. No mention, however, is made of Thetis here; she seems to owe her inclusion in the *Heroikos* to her particular role in the *theoria* and perhaps to her Thessalian connections.

[38] *Her.*, 53, 19-21: Θετταλοῖς γὰν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἐναγισμάτων μηνίοντα αἰσθόμενος, 'ἐμοί' ἔφην, 'ὦ Ἀχιλλεῦ, πάρες τοῦτο'. ὁ δ' οὐ πείθεται, φησὶ δ' αὐτοῖς κακόν τι ἐκ θαλάττης δώσειν. καὶ δεδία μὴ παρὰ τῆς Θέτιδος εὕρηταί τι αὐτοῖς ὁ δεινὸς ἐκεῖνος καὶ ἀμείλικτος.' κἀγὼ μέν, ξένε, ταῦτα ἀκούσας τοῦ Πρωτεσίλεω, ἐρυσίβας τε ᾠμην καὶ ὁμίχλας προσβεβλήσεσθαι τοῖς Θετταλῶν ληίοις ὑπὸ τοῦ 'Αχιλλέως ἐπὶ φθορᾷ τοῦ καρποῦ· ταυτὶ γὰρ τὰ πάθη δοκεῖ πως ἐκ θαλάττης ἐπὶ τὰς εὐκάρπους τῶν ἠπείρων ἰζάνειν. ᾠμην δὲ καὶ ἐπικλυσθήσεσθαί τινας τῶν ἐν Θετταλίᾳ πόλεων…

[39] SLATKIN, *l.c.* (n. 24), makes the interesting and valuable connection between Thetis and Demeter Melaina, the Arkadian goddess who emerges from Pausanias' description of her cult especially as a deity given to punitive anger and liable to threaten agricultural stability if not properly maintained. On this, see also L. BRUIT, "Pausanias à Phigalie. Sacrifices non sanglants et discours idéologique," *Metis* 1 (1986), p. 71-96.

[40] E. VERMEULE, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, Berkeley, 1979, p. 185-186.

of men.' Though it can be a source of purification for those on shore, it consequently contains all the pollution and miasma which have been poured into it. A related theme is the sea's barrenness, probably reflected in the somewhat ambiguous Homeric word *atrugetos*, 'unharvested', from *trugaô* ('gather', 'harvest'), if one regards it as a rough synonym of *atrugês*. This does not mean that the sea is devoid of products, some of them edible; indeed, it teems with fish and other creatures. However, as Buxton points out, the sea is perceived as unlike the realm of terrestrial agriculture, and cannot be treated to the same regulating, ordering human processes.[41]

An odd and isolated myth about Thetis adds a final strand to this web of associations. In a passage of Ptolemy Hephaistion (transmitted by Photios), Thetis in the form of a seal (*phokos*) kills Helen.[42] This peculiar little story does find an echo in the myth of Phokos, the son of Aiakos and Psamathe ('Sandy'); Phokos is conceived while his mother – trying, as Thetis tries, to escape – is in temporary seal form.[43] Phokos is the brother of Peleus, and so the myth clearly has Thessalian, and indeed Thetidian, connections. We could regard Photios' version, the seal-metamorphosis of Thetis, as being a whimsical offshoot of the Phokos story with no real heredity; even if this is so, however, it is significant to find Thetis appearing in the guise of a destructive and vengeful seal. Seals are not merely random denizens of the sea; they have a special character based largely on their mammalian nature, which sets them apart from the world of fishes. This quality is most clearly seen in Book IV of the *Odyssey*, in which Menelaos is forced into close proximity with seals in his attempt to capture Proteus, the old sea-god and the seals' herdsman.

Two things are notable in this episode. First, the seals share the pestilent and repellent property of the sea in which they live, described above. Menelaos makes this clear when he describes lying in ambush under flayed seal-skins, a ruse provided by the helpful Eidothea. [44]

> There was my terrible place of ambush. The hideous stench
> Of the brine-pastured seals distressed me terribly;
> For who would lie down beside a *kêtos* of the sea?

This is not just the stench of uncured skins; it is the perpetual *keteos odme*,[45] which even Eidothea speaks ruefully of, describing living seals as 'πικρὸν ἀποπνείουσαι ἁλὸς πολυβενθέος ὀδμήν'.[46] The seals convey and embody the

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[41] BUXTON, *o.c.* (n. 11), p. 97-104.

[42] Photios, *Bibl.*, 149.

[43] Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses* XXXVIII.

[44] Lines 441-443: ἔνθα κεν αἰνότατος λόχος ἔπλετο· τεῖρε γὰρ αἰνῶς | φωκάων ἁλιοτρεφέων ὀλοώτατος ὀδμή· | τίς γάρ κ' εἰναλίῳ παρὰ κήτεϊ κοιμηθείη;

[45] Line 446.

[46] Line 406.

bitter, briny odour of the deep, which repels the human Menelaos so strongly that only a drop of Eidothea's divine ambrosia beneath his nose makes it bearable.

So in a way, seals represent all that is alien and off-putting, and miasmatic, about the sea's depths.[47] At the same time, however, their warm-bloodedness is implicitly acknowledged, in *Odyssey* IV, by the strong parallelism between them and the terrestrial flocks who follow shepherds on land. Proteus is directly compared with a shepherd, and his behaviour bears this out, for he is an unmissable marine counterpart to Polyphemos, counting his beasts carefully by fives before lying down to sleep in their midst[48] (and so, like the Cyclops, rendering himself vulnerable to a hero's attack). The shore-cave in which he sleeps enhances the similarity. Though products of the barren and pestilent sea, seals can echo the fruitful herds of the pastoral realm; they are even called *zatrepheas*, 'fatted'.[49] However, they give neither meat nor milk, and ultimately their resemblance to the flocks of the land only serves to highlight this basic distinction. Moreover, Proteus' spell in his shepherd's cave is a fleeting one, and once his prophecy is spoken he slips back into the *atrugetos* waves.

These, then, are the various significances of the seal, and we can perceive the suitability of Thetis adopting that form. To sum up this section, it may be said that the sea plainly has an independent characterisation as pestilent and unfruitful; [50] in addition, however, Thetis can embody or channel this quality as she does in the *Heroikos*. In this, once again, sea and mountain, and Thetis and Cheiron, appear strongly contrasting: one brings disease, the other provides the means to ward it off. One damages crops; the other represents extreme natural fruitfulness, though of a sort at odds with normal agriculture. This will find resonances in the next section, in which the focus shifts to the theme of kourotrophy and care of the young.

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[47] It is interesting to note a remark of Plutarch, which could be seen to epitomise Greek attitudes towards the sea: one of his speakers in the *Quaestiones Convivalium* (*Mor.,* 669e) remarks that 'sea animals… are a species entirely alien and remote from us (*ekphylon … kai apoikon hêmôn*)'. Seals have superficial resemblance to land animals, a resemblance which can be played with using pastoral imagery, but are really part of the sea's alien, worrying realm.

[48] Lines 411-413.

[49] Line 451.

[50] Note also the wider *topos* of punishment (especially divinely sent) coming from the sea, often in the form of a *kêtos*. For example, the shore of Troy is ravaged by a sea-monster sent by Poseidon as punishment for Laomedon's failure to pay him for his part in building the city walls: see Apollod., II, 5, 9. Antoninus Liberalis explicitly connects a *kêtos* sent by Poseidon with the simultaneous destruction of crops and infliction of famine (see Ant. Lib., *Met.* III). This is interesting in view of the effect of Thetis' sea-borne pestilence in the *Heroikos*, blighting the crops of the Thessalians.

5. Thessalian Thetis and ambiguous kourotrophy

Both Thetis and Cheiron are explicitly connected, in myth, with the care and raising of the young. Cheiron is, as has been said, the nurse and educator of a large number of heroes; Thetis shelters and nurses the infant Dionysos when he is pursued by the impious Lykourgos, and similarly rescues the young Hephaistos after he has been cast away by his disgusted mother, Hera.[51] Hephaistos himself highlights the contrast between rejecting Hera and sheltering Thetis. In so doing, he calls his mother *kunôps*, bitch-faced, a word which, along with variations, plays a special role in the designation of malign females in Greek myths. In the *Iliad*, Helen in self-reproach refers to herself several times as either *kunôps* or *kuon* ('bitch');[52] in Hesiod's verse, Pandora is described as having a *kuneos noos*, a bitch-like mind. Bitch-imagery seems in these contexts to be used of women who combine great beauty with a baneful and destructive nature; both Helen and Pandora function as scourges of the race of men, whose beauty is the key to their success in this role. Pandora especially is a perfect dolos – trick, snare – because of the discrepancy between her exterior (beautiful) and her interior (dog-like, destructive): her beauty is unreliable and does not reflect the nature within.

At first glance, Thetis seems to have nothing in common with such females, and indeed, in the *Iliad*, to be contrasted with one of them; Davies has argued, additionally, that in the poetry of Alkaios Thetis and Helen are presented as contrasting models of the maternal, good and bad respectively.[53] Thus it might be said that Thetis and Cheiron share a kourotrophic function; and on one level their roles in this domain do seem rather similar. Cave and sea-bed both serve as havens for the young, and in Thetis' case an element of rescue is added, rendering her not just a nurse but also a benefactrix. Moreover, Cheiron shares his nurturing role on Pelion with nymphs, his daughters; as Thetis, also a nymph, is in one tradition his daughter, it may be supposed that the two are to be perceived as working along very similar lines. It would be easy to turn this into a cultic label, designating both as – at root – kourotrophic deities with a fertility-dimension.

A closer inspection, however, will show that Cheiron and Thetis diverge significantly in terms of their mythical relation to care of the young. In this section it will be shown that Cheiron's role can be seen not only as in contrast with Thetis' but also, at times, as actually counteracting it.

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[51] Thetis and Dionysos: Hom., *Il.* VI, 130-137. Thetis and Hephaistos: Hom., *Il.* XVIII, 394-398; *Hom. Hym.* III, 319-321. In the *Iliad* there is a certain amount of verbal similarity between the Dionysos and the Hephaistos episodes. In both, the phrase *hupedexato kolpôi* is used of Thetis' sheltering action.

[52] E.g. at *Il.* III, 180 (*kunôps*) and VI, 344 & 356 (both *kuôn* in the genitive, *kunos*).

[53] M. DAVIES, "Alcaeus, Thetis and Helen," *Hermes* 114 (1986), p. 257-262.

The key to this matter lies in Thetis' own parenthood, which emerges from the sources as a highly ambiguous and even controversial topic. Her actions and personality in the *Iliad* reveal little of this ambiguity, for it is out of keeping with her role within the themes of the poem, as described by Slatkin thus:

> In defining Thetis through a selective representation of her mythology, the *Iliad* makes explicit, emphatic use of her attributes as a nurturing mother – a kourotrophos – and protector. To put it another way, this aspect of Thetis' mythology – her maternal, protective power – which is adapted by the *Iliad*, makes possible one of the poem's central ideas: the vulnerability of even the greatest of the heroes.

Two points here are vital: first, that the poet of the *Iliad* selects certain parts of Thetis' mythology (over others) to fulfil his thematic purposes; second, that the parts selected place cardinal emphasis on her role as good kourotrophos, nurturing, protecting, supporting, and ultimately grieving. In this selection, much is left out. However, other mythographic sources give us an idea of the elements not chosen by Homer, and we are able to restore the full peculiarity of Thetis as mother.

The first point to note is Thetis' reluctance to wed Peleus or bear his children. This is a theme which, naturally perhaps, does not find a place in the *Iliad*, but which finds full expression elsewhere. In one tradition marriage to a mortal is a punishment;[54] in another, it is a way of disarming the prophecy that she would produce a son greater than his father, a contingency rendering her unsuitable for a divine partner.[55] Either way, Thetis' marriage is underpinned by her unwillingness, which finds its most extreme expression in the contortions she performs to evade Peleus on the shore. So, even though Thetis is known as the mother of a glorious child, the circumstances of his conception were forced upon her very much against her will. Just as being yoked to the mortal Peleus gives Thetis displeasure, so she suffers keenly because of the mortality of her son Achilles; *dusaristotokeia*, the *Iliad* calls her,[56] referring to the cruel irony that for all her son's excellence he will, through his inevitable death, eventually bring her misery.

We begin to encounter divergence, however, between the Iliadic and other traditions if we look at the episodes which prefigure the Trojan war, and which deal with the infancy of Thetis' children, Achilles among them. One of the most famous episodes within this bracket is that in which Thetis dips Achilles in the river Styx in an attempt to make him immortal; she succeeds, but the neglected portion of his heel ultimately proves his undoing. This accords perfectly with the Iliadic motif of the divine mother doing everything she can to protect her mortal son, but ultimately encountering the inevitability of his demise.

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[54] Thetis punished by Zeus for rejecting his advances: *Kypria*, fr. 2 (ed. DAVIES).

[55] This version is found in Pindar, *Isthm.* VIII, 26-57.

[56] E.g. at XVIII, 54.

However, the oldest source for the Stygian version is Statius, in the first century AD,[57] and among older variants we find some rather different stories. The Hellenistic *Argonautika* of Apollonios has Achilles immersed in fire rather than a river, and has Thetis anoint him with ambrosia; here the only real divergence from the famous Statian story is the substances employed. Lykophron, however, adds a curious detail: that Achilles was in fact the only child of Thetis who survived the procedure; six died in the flames.[58] Here Lykophron seems to be drawing on an earlier, darker theme: that of the destructive aspect of Thetis' attempts to immortalise her children.[59] In the pseudo-Hesiodic *Aigimios*, transmitted by a scholiast on the *Argonautika*, there occur the following lines:[60]

> Thetis cast her children by Peleus into a cauldron of water, *wanting to know whether they were mortal* […] and when many had in fact died, Peleus grew angry and prevented Achilles from being flung into the cauldron.

This is rather startling. The dead children are not even the victims of botched attempts to render them immortal, as in Lykophron, but of a process of experimentation to which Achilles also would surely have fallen prey had not his father rescued him. In this version, there are only two possibilities, in the mind of Thetis, for her children: they must either be immortal or dead. Only Achilles, through his father's intervention, is left to occupy the rather nebulous half-and-half state between mortality and divinity which is his salient feature in epic and more widely.[61]

Her relationship with Achilles takes Thetis off into another, very forceful epic discourse concerning the nature of the hero. She, like Eos (lover of Tithonos and mother of Memnon) presides over the fraught relationship between *thnêtoi* and *athanatoi*. This finds an echo in the *Heroikos* of Philostratus, in which she presides over the dual sacrifice to Achilles and therefore over his

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[57] *Achilleid* I, 134-140. The evidence of visual material does, however, suggest the possibility of Hellenistic antecedents for this variant: see J. BURGESS, "The Death of Achilles in Ancient Myth," *ClAnt* 14 (1995), p. 217-243, esp. p. 226-228.

[58] Lyk., *Alex.*, 178-179.

[59] It is interesting to compare the story in which Medea, that notorious child-killer of myth, attempts and fails to make her children by Jason immortal, and is prevented from further experimentation by Jason (see Pausanias, II, 3, 11). In this instance no harm comes to the children, but a destructive parallel could be discerned in Medea's treatment of Pelias: she tricks him into entering a cauldron whose boiling contents she claims will rejuvenate him (a version of immortalising magic) but in fact he is simply boiled to death. See Diodoros, IV, 52, 1-2; Pausanias, VIII, 11, 2-3. Although Medea is not herself from Thessaly, the story has a largely Thessalian (specifically Iolkian) context.

[60] Schol. Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* IV, 816: ἡ Θέτις εἰς λέβητα ὕδατος ἔβαλλεν τοὺν ἐκ Πηλέως γεννωμένους, *γνῶναι βουλομένη εἰ θνητοί εἰσιν* […] καὶ δὴ πολλῶν διαφθαρέντων ἀγανακτῆσαι τὸν Πηλέα καὶ κωλῦσαι τὸν Ἀχιλλέα ἐμβληθῆναι εἰς λέβητα.

[61] Even in sources which do not treat Thetis as wantonly destructive of her children's lives, the process of immortalisation by fire is often depicted as agonising for the infant: see e.g. Apollod., III, 13, 6; Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* IV, 874.

split nature, both mortal hero and immortal god. Of particular importance here, however, is the difference between the Thetis who champions her son in the *Iliad* (or the Thetis of the *Aithiopis*[62] who eventually, after his death, installs him in divine glory on the Island of Leuke) and the Thetis who methodically scorches or boils away the mortal parts of her children, Achilles nearly included. Thessaly, it should be noted, is the setting for this dark chapter; when Achilles reaches adulthood, the location shifts into other zones, into the Troad, the Euxine, and the wide narrative sweep of epic.

Achilles, of course, survives Thetis' destructive ministrations. However, the next stage of her imperfect parenting takes over: she leaves her husband and infant son and returns to the sea, her natural element. This is not so in the Homeric tradition, which does not mention a premature separation. It is impossible to say whether this is because such a story did not exist as early as that, or whether it did and the poet of the *Iliad* rejected it in order to preserve the closeness of his essential mother/son pairing. In any case, Thetis' departure in Achilles' infancy is, it should be noted, found only in post-Classical texts. The fullest treatment is in the *Argonautika* of Apollonios, a third century BC text, in which we find the following lines:[63]

> In the middle of the night she used to surround her mortal child with fire and every day anoint his tender flesh with ambrosia, to make him immortal and save him from the horrors of old age. One night Peleus, leaping out of bed, saw his boy gasping in the flames and gave a terrible cry. It was a foolish thing to do. Thetis heard, and snatching up the child threw him screaming on the floor. Then, passing quickly out of the house, light as a dream and insubstantial as the air, she plunged into the sea. She was mortally offended and she never returned.

It seems extremely likely that accounts such as this derive something from earlier treatments of Demeter's attempt to immortalise the infant Demophoön. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, for example, the goddess, interrupted when the process is incomplete, throws down the child and leaves in rage, a motif with which that of Thetis' angry departure bears obvious similarities. However, this is not a case of senseless literary borrowing. As has been said above, Slatkin asserts that Demeter and Thetis share, throughout the available material, the feature of anger and its expression, anger which can be exercised through punitive withdrawal just as much as through direct aggression. Black Demeter in Arkadian cult responds to offence, whether human or divine, by removing her life-giving powers from the

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[62] Transmitted in Proklos, *Chrestomathia,* 2.

[63] Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* IV, 868-879: ἡ μὲν γὰρ βροτέας αἰεὶ περὶ σάρκας ἔδαιεν | νύκτα διὰ μέσσην φθογμῷ πυρός. ἤματα δ' αὖτε | ἀμβροσίῃ χρίεσκε τέρεν δέμας, ὄφρα πέλοιτο | ἀθάνατος, καί οἱ στυγερὸν χροΐ γῆρας ἀλάλκοι. | αὐτὰρ ὅγ' ἐξ εὐνῆς ἀνεπάλμενος εἰσενόησεν | παῖδα φίλον σπαίροντα διὰ φλογός· ἦκε δ' αὐτὴν | σμερδαλέην ἐσιδών, μέγα νήπιος· ἡ δ' αἴουσα | τὸν μὲν ἄρ' ἀρπάγδην χαμάδις βάλε κεκληγῶτα, | αὐτὴ δὲ πνοιῇ ἰκέλη δέμας, ἠύτ' ὄνειρος, | βῆ ῥ' ἴμεν ἐκ μεγάροιο θοῶς, καὶ ἐσήλατο πόντον | χωσαμένη· μετὰ δ' οὔτι παλίσσυτος ἵκετ' ὀπίσσω. *Cf.* Apollod., III, 13, 6.

agrarian world, leaving men starving and even the gods dismayed. Likewise, Thetis is a deity who, if thwarted, can withdraw nourishment and inflict absence.

Moreover, it is here that the roles of Thetis and Cheiron in the myths come together. When Thetis leaves, Peleus brings the abandoned infant Achilles to the centaur's cave, where he receives not only education but also more fundamental care: feeding with strengthening substances and providing a close emotional bond which numerous literary narratives exploit. This reminds us of a point raised earlier: that Thetis' marine elusiveness contrasts with the fixed point of the mountain and the cave. Thetis returns to the undulating waters of her original home, and Peleus and Achilles make the journey to Cheiron's cave to counteract the damaging effects of her withdrawal.

An even more explicit opposition of their contributions is made in the admittedly peculiar and isolated narrative of Ptolemy Hephaistion, who describes the following scene:[64] Thetis is burning her children in her attempt to rid them of their mortal portion, has killed several, and has just begun on Achilles, when the child, having sustained burns only to his foot, is rescued by Peleus (clearly a variant on the vulnerable heel motif). Brought in to heal the injury, Cheiron replaces the damaged ankle-joint with one taken from a dead Giant known for his swift running. This component eventually fails Achilles and causes his death, but this does not detract from the sense that Cheiron's mythical purpose is here to repair what Thetis has harmed.[65] Moreover, Achilles' eventual death is actually caused by the flaw which Thetis' burning has implanted within him.

Thetis also reflects, in her imperfect parenting, the ambiguous fruitfulness of the sea, which teems with strange life but remains unharvested, untamed, and untrustworthy. However, there is a symbolic dimension to this contrast which goes beyond the immediate contrast between the elusive, unreliable, destructive Thetis and the steadfast, healing Cheiron. Another, more profound

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[64] In Photios, *Bibl.*, 190.

[65] It also increases the abiding impression given by the sources that Peleus and Cheiron are very much in cahoots – in some contexts in shared opposition to Thetis, as when Cheiron advises Peleus on her violent capture. It is also interesting to note that according to one text Cheiron and Peleus were joint recipients of human sacrifice. Clement of Alexandria records the following remark by Monimos: Μόνιμος δ' ἱστορεῖ ἐν τῇ τῶν θαυμασίων συναγωγῇ ἐν Πέλλῃ τῆς Θετταλίας Ἀχαιὸν ἄνθρωπον Πηλεῖ καὶ Χείρωνι καταθύεσθαι (Clem. Alex., *Protrepticus* III, 42, 4 = Monimos, *FHistGR* IV F 1 (ed. MÜLLER): 'Monimos records in his collection of marvels that in Thessalian Pella an Achaian man was sacrificed to Peleus and Cheiron.' There is so much we do not know about this situation: when, where, by whom, how often, whether regularly or in response to certain circumstances; Hughes, for one, does not care to read this as evidence of a regular and actual ritual (see D.D. HUGHES, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*, London, 1991, p. 121). Another attempt to link Peleus and Cheiron in cult is made by A. KLINZ, in his *Hieros gamos: quaestiones selectae ad sacras nuptias graecorum religionis et poeseos pertinentes*, Wittenberg, 1933, p. 58-63, in which he claims that Peleus was originally – before the inevitable process of hypostasis and misunderstanding – the eponymous god of Pelion, with Cheiron as a companion in cult. This is anything but convincing, and we are thrown back on what we do know: that Cheiron is repeatedly depicted in the literary sources as the advisor and helper of Peleus, sometimes in opposition to the actions of Thetis.

point of divergence relates to failed and successful transitions. Thetis cannot leave her children as they are: she is compelled to attempt to usher them across the divide between mortality and divinity, an attempt which never succeeds, proving the immutability of the separation between gods and mortals. The one child who actually survives this futile attempt, Achilles, is caught forever in the awkward state of the superhuman hero with the human's fatal vulnerability. In the end, of course, according to the *Aithiopis* at least, Thetis is able to affect a transition of both place and state, carrying Achilles to Leuke and to immortality, but not before he has experienced death, and not in the Thessalian portion of the saga. Cheiron, on the other hand, accomplishes his own brand of transition with unfailing success, equipping heroes with the strength and abilities needed for their lives ahead. He is not concerned to produce immortals – he is not immortal himself, in the long run – but, instead, perfect practitioners of that most ambiguous state, that of the hero: excellent above the level of normal men, but ultimately fated, like all men, to suffer death.

I end this section with the observation that there is another way in which Thetis is rather like the malign females of myth who are characterised by their inside/outside discrepancy. There is not space here to express fully the subtleties of what is a wide and complex discourse; however, it is worth noting that one specifically Thessalian – indeed Magnesian – aspect of Thetis connects significantly with the theme of deceptive female exteriors. This is her association with the sepia, or cuttlefish, an association rightly noted by Borgeaud as significant for her Thessalian mythical persona. The *sepia* is the most perfect evocation of the closeness of fluidity and layering in ancient thought.

The figure of the cuttlefish, as Borgeaud points out, is the strongest link between Thetis and the stretch of Thessalian shore which was sacred to her. The promontory was called Sepias after her adoption of the form of a *sepia*, we are told;[66] however, in a touch of double determination, we also learn from another source, Athenaios, that the sea around that point was especially full of *sepiai*.[67] One source tells us that the *sepia* was the last form adopted by Thetis in her attempt to evade the clutches of Peleus; it was also when she was in this shape that the two actually had intercourse (a somewhat lurid contingency).[68]

For the symbolic valency of the sepia, the reader is referred to the still powerful discussion by Detienne and Vernant,[69] who treat it as a component

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[66] *Etym. Magn. s.v.* 'Sepias'; schol. Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* I, 582.

[67] Ath., I, 30d.

[68] Schol. Lyk., *Alex.*, 175: `διωκομένη ὑπὸ Πηλέως ἡ Θέτις μετήλαττεν ἑαυτὴν ὡς ὁ Πρωτεὺς εἰς διαφόρους ιδέας, ἐκεῖ δέ κατέσχεν αὐτὴν ἐν σηπίας μορφῇ καὶ ἐμίγη αὐτῇ, ὅθεν καὶ Σηπίας χωρίον Μαγνησίας Θετταλικῆς'. Detienne and Vernant, however, identify this as a tradition going back to the Kypria. See M. DETIENNE and J.-P. VERNANT, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. J. Lloyd London, 1978, p. 159.

[69] DETIENNE and VERNANT, *o.c.* (n. 68); the chapter on Thetis is p. 133-174.

within their study of the quality of *mêtis*, or cunning intelligence. *Sepiai* have, and indeed embody, *mêtis*, because of their extreme flexibility of form: like Thetis, they are *pantomorphos*; they can take almost any shape and can be confined to none. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, they have recourse to the trickery essential to *mêtis*: they use their black ink to conceal themselves when threatened (having first concealed it within themselves), and also when hunting their prey. This *dolos* is central to their adaptable, responsive nature.

The connection between Thetis and the *sepia* receives some interesting expositions. Perhaps most telling (and most tantalising) are the lines from the *Attikon Deipnon* of Matron, a work of which we only have small excerpts, courtesy of Athenaios' *Deipnosophistai*. It is a work of satire, in which the food items at an extravagant dinner-party are introduced in absurd epic language (with much direct verbal borrowing from Homer) as combatants within a heroic martial parade, whose enemies are the diners who fall on them ravenously.[70] Various ludicrous aristeiai occur. The following lines are important for the current discussion:[71]

> And there came the daughter of Nereus, silver-footed Thetis,
> The fair-tressed *sepia*, dread goddess with mortal voice,
> Who alone, being a fish, knows both white and black.

Thetis takes her place among the other edibles as the sepia, reflecting the myth of her sepia-transformation. Clearly, aspects of the cuttle's real-life anatomy are evoked here. The use of *euplokamos*, for example, a Homeric epithet frequently used of female characters, including Thetis, derives its humour here from the fact that it echoes the *sepia*'s waving tentacles.[72]

Rather more complicated is the third and final line, in which it is said of Thetis that she 'alone, being a fish, knows both white and black.' The sense of the participle ἐοῦσα is extremely uncertain. The phrase is often translated 'alone of all the fishes', and yet that sense seems to stretch the Greek itself beyond endurance.[73] The participle might carry a causal sense – 'because she is a fish' – or equally a concessive one – 'although she is a fish'. It is impossible to decide with any confidence, and yet one might extend cautious support to the latter, on the following grounds. Fish can occasionally be described as white, there

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[70] On the text, see E. DEGANI, "Problems in Greek Gastronomic Poetry: On Matro's *Attikon Deipnon*," in J. WILKINS, D. HARVEY and M. DOBSON (eds.), *Food in Antiquity*, Exeter, 1995, p. 413-428. See also J. DAVIDSON, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*, London, 1997, p. 231-232.

[71] Matron, *Attikon Deipnon* = Ath., I, 135 c: ἦλθε δὲ Νηρῆος θυγάτηρ, Θέτις ἀργυρόπεζα, | σηπίη εὐπλόκαμος, δεινὴ θεὸς αὐδήεσσα, | ἣ μόνη ἰχθὺς ἐοῦσα τὸ λευκὸν καὶ μέλαν οἶδε.

[72] For an ancient comparison of the sepia's tentacles with hair, see Oppian, *Halieutica* II, 122.

[73] Also ill-advised is the translation of the latter half of the line as 'knows *the difference between* black and white'. This interpretation is not so much linguistically impossible as thematically unnecessary.

being an example in this very text,[74] though the (external) whiteness of *sepiai* seems to have received special notice.[75] What sets the *sepia* apart from other sea-creatures, however, is the fact that it comprises – 'knows' – both white and (uniquely) black: it is white without yet contains blackness within. The *sepia* is arranged in concealing layers, black within white and, when the ink has been expelled, white within black.

Her association with the *sepia* transfers to Thetis something of this type of colour duality. She is never explicitly called ink-filled, but Borgeaud convincingly argues that the idea of inner blackness was an important element in her characterisation. He links it with the character of her element, the sea, calling her a 'sombre déesse des profondeurs marines.'[76] Slatkin's article on Thetis' mythological persona enhances and adds nuance to this picture. She shows that the black/white juxtaposition of Thetis' *sepia* form ties her in with a strong class of goddesses for whom black expresses vengeful anger, white appeasement or benignity. The most graphic example of this is the Arkadian cult of the Eumenides who, in myth, were black when angry and vengeful, white when appeased.[77] This instance suggests that in Thetis' case white is perhaps operating as the expression not only of female beauty but also of divine benignity.

What is vital to the character of Thetis, however, is not an overtly sombre quality but rather the disparity between the bright appearance and the murk within. It alerts us to the fact that Thetis is capable of two types of *dolos*, trickery, the word identified as crucial to the conception of *mêtis* by Detienne and Vernant.[78] On the one hand, *qua* shape-changing goddess, she uses multiplicity of forms, and rapid transformation, as her means of evasion; on the other, *qua sepia*, she uses concealment, the creation of a pall of darkness to shroud and mask. In fact, transformation and layering/concealment go hand in

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[74] See for example the reference to an eel as white-armed (!) at Ath., IV, 135c – the choice of this epithet, Homeric as it is, must derive from the existing fish-as-white idea.

[75] See e.g. Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, 126. Here a woman in a false beard is compared with a cuttlefish similarly disguised, and the scholiast explains this with the words λευκαὶ γὰρ αἱ σηπίαι. See DETIENNE and VERNANT *o.c.* (n. 68), p. 160-161 and 174 n. 139.

[76] VERMEULE, *o.c.* (n. 40), p. 179 describes how, in ancient thought, the sea is persistently accorded this discrepancy between surface (shining, apparently placid) and depths (murky, miasmatic, full of *kêtê*): this is just the characterisation of outside and inside that we find in Thetis. Interestingly, Semonides uses the sea as an image of the mutability of the female temperament, placid one moment, stormy the next (lines 27 to 42 of the famous catalogue of female types). This does not play on the inside/outside theme, but it does reinforce the connection between the sea and feminine unreliability and danger; also that between the sea and transformation.

[77] Paus. VIII, 34, 2-3.

[78] The *mêtis* of the sepia: Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, 622a 8; Oppian (*Hal.* I, 406) refers to the *sepia dolomêtis*. Interestingly, Plutarch (*Mor.*, 978a) remarks that the sepia copies the gods of Homer by concealing itself in a *kuaneê nephelê*, a dark cloud – just the imagery used of Thetis herself in the *Iliad*. See p. 90 above.

hand in ancient thought.[79] Thetis, however, gives the connection a special dimension, as the *sepia* simultaneously executes its ink-diffusing *dolos* and its physical fluidity and changefulness. It is worth noting that the sea and its denizens were frequently associated with darkness;[80] on land, Thetis might look like a fair-skinned woman of great beauty, but she contains within her the murk of the sea from which she comes.

Darkness is perhaps not Thetis' only form of concealed menace. Latent animality finds one final expression in the mythology of Thetis. In one account, Peleus has killed his younger half-brother Phokos ('Seal'[81]) in a fit of jealousy, and Phokos' mother Psamathe sends a fierce wolf to kill Peleus in revenge. The wolf, however, incapacitates itself by gorging on a herd of straying cattle; and when it catches up with Peleus, Thetis, who is with him, is able to turn it to stone by pulling a frightening face, tongue protruding.[82] The grimace is irresistibly reminiscent of the gorgon-faces so frequent in Greek art, with their protruding tongues and prominent fangs; and though it is a lone instance in the case of Thetis, it shows her ability to take on an archetypal apotropaic, fear-inspiring form.[83] Her ability suddenly to metamorphose from lovely goddess to terrifying one reminds us perhaps of the motif of the pale squid, when angered, ejecting black ink. Thetis' loveliness is not to be relied on. In this she has more in common with Pandora and Helen (beauties with dog-minds and destructive potential) than might be thought from reading the *Iliad* alone.

6. Conclusion

The preceding section took us somewhat away from Cheiron; and indeed this is not wholly accidental. It is a fact that Thetis' characterisation in the sources is more complex than the centaur's, because it is full of tensions and ambiguities. Thetis expresses and explores anxieties; Cheiron seems almost desired to still them. His character is never allowed to display any potential for malevolence; the worst act of which he is capable is death, and his death is (according to Pindar) a loss to mankind.

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[79] For example, David Wiles has argued with regard to theatre that in ancient thought the donning of a mask meant not only concealment of identity but complete change of identity. See D. WILES, "The Use of Masks in Modern Performances of Greek Drama," in E. HALL (ed.), *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, Oxford, 2004, p. 245-263.

[80] Reflected in the adjectives frequently used to describe the sea, such as *oinops*, *kuaneos* / *kuanobenthês*, etc.

[81] This is an interesting adjacent case of marine metamorphosis: Psamathe turned herself into a seal to avoid the amorous pursuit of Aiakos; in vain, and the resulting child's name suggests that he carries the vestiges of his mother's animal form. See Ant. Lib., *Met.* XXXVIII.

[82] Ant. Lib., *Met.* XXXVIII; schol. Lyk., *Alex.*, 175 and 901.

[83] See J.-P. VERNANT, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, edited by Froma I. Zeitlin, Princeton, 1991, p. 116-125, for the terror-inspiring qualities of the gorgon's face.

To regard Thetis and Cheiron as simply opposites of each other would be to neglect the subtleties of their respective characterisation. There are many aspects of their personalities which operate quite independently and have no thematic relationship with each other at all. If we knew more about the cult of Thetis, in Thessaly and elsewhere, this complexity would surely only increase.

However, on several key points they can usefully be studied together, and be seen to relate through a system of strong and significant contrast. Within this contrast lies another: that between the Iliadic and the non-Iliadic Thetis; or, to put it another way, that between Thetis as she operates in Thessaly, and Thetis as she operates on the grander stage of epic. For reasons unknown, Thessaly does not see the best of Thetis, as wife or (especially) as mother. The hostile portrayal of Thetis seems to run parallel to the strong mythical (and perhaps cultic) rapport of Cheiron and Peleus, in which Cheiron repairs, or at least attempts to repair, everything that Thetis has damaged. This picture is not absolute. The story in which Thetis, by pulling a terrible face, saves Peleus from Psamathe's wolf places her in a role strikingly similar to that of Cheiron when he saves Peleus from the murderous centaurs on Pelion. It makes her an adjutor and protector rather than the unreliable, destructive figure of other narratives. However, it is a lone voice.

It is not the case that Thetis is bad while Cheiron is good. Rather, Thetis is allowed to become a testing-ground for profound ambivalence and ambiguity, while Cheiron is not allowed to reflect any ambivalence, or show any ambiguity in his character, at all. Both processes give their subjects great cultural power: Thetis expresses uncertainty, Cheiron certainty; it is the juxtaposition of the two (explicit or implicit) that proves so potent in ancient narratives. Together, Cheiron and Thetis also encapsulate all of the imaginary Thessaly, all its mythical territory: the culture of the inland plain, the mountain (Pelion) which dominates the Magnesian litoral; the eastern shore; the wider marine network within which the region should certainly be viewed.

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